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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of research literature on second language learning in children. Theories regarding these aspects of second language acquisition are summarized: (1) developmental stages of language acquisition; (2) the role of imitation and practice; (3) differences between oral and written language skills; (4) the ways in which strategies acquired while learning the first language can affect, positively or negatively, the acquisition of a second; (5) teaching methods in second language learning; and (6) the significance of learners' motivation. In conclusion, the paper argues that the most important factor in second language acquisition and development may be the presence of a teacher with a sincere interest in what the learner has to say: how the learner speaks and writes can be improved by different means, but the important thing is successful communication. (KH)

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BY

Shirley A. Torres

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LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE

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In first language acquisition and development children go through predictable stages which are very much the same everywhere, possibly universal. (Brown, 1978, Lenneberg, 1967, Mc Neil, 1970). Babbling is the first stage. It is a period of preparation for language acquisition. The infant is listening and distinguishing the sounds, and preparing his/her speech mechanisms for the production of those sounds. The second stage is the holophrastic, in which children use one word, to represent complete thoughts when uttered. Finally comes the telegraphic stage in which words that have a grammatical function are omitted just as an adult does when sending a telegram. After this, language development is rapid in all respects. From a second language acquisition point of view, children go through a preparation stage in which they learn to differentiate the sound through listening and preparing their speech mechanisms to produce the sounds of the second language.

Then the second language learner will move on to the holophrastic and telegraphic stages. The teacher or model will expose the child to the second language and the child will respond according to the stage of language development in which he or she is.

Issues on first language acquisition are important to understand second language learning and teaching. In second language development, acquisition usually takes place at any age after four. The individual's cognitive development is at a more advanced stage. Thus, the person will already possess concepts and meanings that he/she will want to express through new vocabulary. First language acquisition

experience may facilitate or hinder the second language acquisition task either in positive or negative transfers from one language to another (Jakobovits, 1969).

Ruth Metraux (1962) reports on the way in which a second language is learned, once the first language has been established. She concluded that young children who learned the second language relatively fast had very similar personality traits: they were talkative, outgoing, easily adaptable children, very eager to express themselves. On the other hand, the quiet, reserved children who were somewhat timid or introverts learned the second language a little slower. Eventually both groups attained native fluency.

Inspired and stimulated by Madame Metraux's study and conclusions, Rebecca M. Valette (1969) selected a case study to further analyze the process of second language learning. She studied Jean-Michel, age three years three months, son of an American mother and a French father, who had been brought up in the United States speaking English. He then moved to Paris with his family and enrolled in a French nursery school.

Jean-Michel was described as a timid but alert child. After a daily nine-months total immersion in French from 9 to 5 in an enjoyable and playful nursery school situation, Jean-Michel had the oral proficiency of a child of three in his new language. Rebecca Valette (1969) concluded that language learning is a complex and lengthy process, even for a young child and even after knowing a first language. Valette's opinion is that the manner through which the young child learned grammatical forms supports the pattern practice theories.

Language theorists (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957) have been recommending completely oral second language courses under the premise that the printed word interferes with the accurate acquisition of the new language. Yet, as seen in the studies of young children previously mentioned, the total absence of written language does not guarantee in itself the completely accurate pronunciation of the second language. The phonological system of the first language can and usually does interfere with a faster acquisition of the second language (Metraux, 1962; Valette, 1969).

Imitation and Practice

The assumption that pattern practice and imitation play a crucial role in language acquisition has been focal to earlier teaching and

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investigation (Jakobovits, 1969). Yet, direct screening of children's tendency to imitate adult forms of speech shows that they almost never repeat the adult sentence exactly as presented (Jakobovits, 1969; Lenneberg, 1967). Direct attempts by a child to imitate adult sentences end up as these examples taken from Lenneberg (1967, p. 316):

Model Sentence	Child Repetition
Johnny is a good boy.	Johnny is good boy.
He takes them for a walk.	He takes them to the walk.
Lassie does not like the water.	He no like the water.
Does Johnny want a cat?	Johnny wants a cat?

It is clearly seen that practice theories as imitation exercises by themselves cannot be sufficient to acquire and develop grammatical forms. Studies (Metraux, 1962; Valette, 1969) demonstrate that rules the child slowly and eventually discovers through meaningful exposure are more important and carry greater weight than practice. Concept acquisition and hypothesis testing are far more important in language development than response strength through rote memory and repetition.

Yet Carroll (1971) believes that there is no real conflict between the audiolingual habit and the cognitive-code learning theories as applied to language teaching. According to Carroll (1968), there is no true opposition between rule governed behavior and language habits in language learning processes. The acquisition or learning of second languages requires both the knowledge of rules and the formation of the habits described by these rules. On the formation of habits, the audiolingual theory assumed that practice and repetition were the crucial factors, but psychology has long since demonstrated that practice and repetition are not crucial in learning, although they have important roles to play (Carroll, 1971).

The audiolingual theory assumed that the habits to form were the substitution of words in slots in sentence patterns and/or the transformation of kinds of sentences to others (Jenkings and Palermo, 1964). According to Carroll (1971), this is not directly relevant to actual language behavior. The important thing would be to decide what kind of habits would be more important to develop for effective communication in a second language, *when* and *in what* sequence to form them.

In first language acquisition there is strong evidence (Jakobovits, 1974; McNeill, 1970) that the acquisition of grammatical rules can be

facilitated by proper presentation of speech materials. Observation of children's speech during play with their mothers or an adult (Jakobovits, 1974) shows almost half of their imitations of adult expansions of children's speech are grammatically progressive. For example, if the child says: "Adam cry" the mother expands this by saying "Yes, Adam cried" or "Adam is crying", depending on her understanding of the child's intentions. An expansion is a developed or corrected imitation. An adult, repeating a child's telegraphic speech, adds the parts he/she thinks have been omitted. If the child's meaning is correctly grasped through understanding of the extralinguistic situation, an expansion will present a surface structure that expresses the deep structure that the child has in mind. The child will have a chance to listen and notice an important correction at a time when this distinction or correction is maximally prominent and meaningful to him/her (Carroll, 1968; Jakobovits, 1974).

Macnamara (1977) believes that the knowledge of language at all levels consists of knowing patterns of relations rather than the components or constituents of these patterns. He says: "if we cannot reduce language to formula, we cannot learn it by formula." (p. 23).

A second language teacher should not require that the learners use only well formed sentences in practice conversations (Jakobovits, 1969). After all, first language learners develop the competence to produce well-formed sentences despite the semi-grammaticality they are exposed to when listening to adults. All natural language acquisition situations expose the learner to semi-grammatical sentences very often. The learner creates a provisional grammar until the acquisition process further develops.

Strategies

Learning a second language takes place at a later age than the first language experience. Second language acquisition involves cognitive development once expressed through the first language alone, now attempting expression through a second and different linguistic code.

After becoming an "expert" in his own first language, a person who starts learning a second language will learn production and understanding of new habits sometimes in contrast or competition with the old. Second language acquisition research (Leopold, 1978) indicates that children may sometimes substitute first language meanings for words in the second language; this is the one word-one object

principle. When substitution of this sort occurs, the children will depend on feedback for clarification. Sometimes meaning will be clarified by expanding what the child says, sometimes by asking for repetition, by saying that one understood or simply by behaving appropriately. The child's focus or main concern will not be correctness but "appropriateness" or effective communication.

Wagner-Gough (1978) describes two young pre-schoolers who are building towers with blocks. One of the boys is a native speaker of English; the other is not. The native speaker tells his friend to stop making it "so tall". The non-native speaker asks what is *sulta*. Ignored by his friend, he begins to talk to himself aloud saying no such word exists. This evidences that as the meaning was not grasped by the young second language learner, he discarded the phrase as nonsense.

Marcussen (1978) summarizes her data on second language acquisition saying that since communication is the goal of all language learners, the parts of language which are not fundamental for communication are learned slower. If a structure is extremely used, and heard often by the learner, he/she will produce it. These effects are modified when a form requires a change in word order or forms for a structure (plurals with *s, z* and *ez.)* These are acquired later. According to Marcussen (1978), if the structure requires a change in word order, or some other modification that creates complexity, it will be simplified or experimented with until the learner understands how to control the complexities. To Marcussen, the learning of whole phrases without clear understanding of how to separate, limit and reorder their constituents in different ways, does not mean that the learner is merely "parroting". He/she is using *intermediate strategies*, slow and simple first steps, adequate and useful at this point in the language learning process.

Some of the strategies shared by both first and second language acquisition processes are: the identification of patterns; attempts to simplify and use words and phrases even if the meanings and structure are only partial approximations; ways of figuring out socially important language and culturally appropriate patterns; and flexibility and risk of trying to use the language(s) because the utterance may be partially correct in meaning and structure.

The child who uses two languages has an advantage because he/she has already learned that words represent concepts that need to be checked for applicability. He/she also has a larger number of words available. The more use he/she can make of the known words and of

what has been learned about them and the realities they represent, the easier and better it will be for him/her to remember and expand meaning. The faster the learner understands this, the more he/she will try to use what is known even if it has to be corrected.

In addition, there are individual styles of learning (Keefe, 1979). While knowledge of the level of cognitive development can provide certain expectations about language use, each child not only has unique experiences with people and events, but also has his/her own learning style which will be reflected in their language development. Roger Brown (1978) states that some children are "word gatherers", while others enjoy playing with patterns and so advance faster in syntactical development. The writer's experience as a second-language teacher corroborates Brown's assertions. Some learners are willing to risk being misunderstood more often than others. Probably due to personal character differences, they will try out new utterances as often as possible.

Teaching Methods in Second Language Learning

Carroll (1971) declares that although teaching methods have been blamed for minimal or no second language proficiency, they may just be one small part of the second language acquisition problem.

A major two year study by Scherer and Werthumer in 1964, looked at the effectiveness of an audiolingual approach and a traditional approach for the teaching of German in college. The study basically showed that there is no real difference between the two approaches, except that the audiolingual students were better at speaking and the traditional students at writing and translation.

Oller (1977) tells us that, in 1967, John B. Carroll investigated foreign language proficiency achieved by college language majors. Carroll discusses the importance of a home environment that is favorable to second language learning either because it motivates the learner positively or it offers an opportunity to use the foreign language at home. Oller (1977) uses this evidence to support his premise that the second-language learner acquires the language better in a natural environment than in a classroom setting. To him it is not the method or the formal instruction that is responsible for the proficiency achieved.

Teachers of second language or foreign languages have always been baffled by the fact that some students barely obtain some lan-

guage skills, while others with the same opportunities develop high-level skills in no time at all. This difference between levels of proficiency among second language learners has been explained in terms of variations in teaching methods, age differences, aptitude and attitudes. "It depends on how the language is taught; he has an ear for language or a knack for languages" are some of the explanations commonly issued. What seems to be a reality is that when the social setting demands it, people will learn the second language no matter what knack or aptitude they might have for language (Spolsky, 1977).

A child on the street will not be able to enjoy playing if he/she cannot make the playmates understand what he/she wants or make out what his/ her friends want to say. The reward for success and punishment for failure arrives instantly and meaningfully. But a teacher will rarely have something so important to say to her pupils or vice-versa that they will eagerly guess at the meaning using whatever means available to get the message across (Macnamara, 1977). This, if any, is the real difference between first and second language acquisition.

Research that has tried to identify the best teaching method for second language acquisition has failed. What has become evident is that when the social setting demands it, the individual will learn a second language no matter what the teaching method employed. When a second language is taught and learned in an unnatural setting (classrooms) it loses spontaneousness. The process will depend totally on the program for its structure, sequence and development. If, in contrast, language is acquired in a natural environment, the same language capacity that operated for first language acquisition will be released and determine second language acquisition (Oller, 1977).

Motivation

Motivation is a crucial factor in language acquisition whether first or second. The learners' attitude toward the second language natural speakers will be very important in determining his/her success in the second language acquisition process. For some second or foreign language students the experience can be seen as positive and broadening. If he/she is open and unprejudiced about the situation, the learner may find him/herself acculturated to the new linguistic and cultural group as he/she learns its language.

Gardner and Lambert (1959) found that some second language

students were "characterized by a willingness to be like the valued members of the community" (p. 271). These would be the integrative oriented second language learners. They identified a positive correlation between this integrative orientation and the language achievement test they administered to the second language students. They also saw a strong correlation between positive attitudes toward the linguistic group and an integrative orientation. This integrative motive implies that success in command of a second language reflects a desire to be like (identification) representative members of the other valued linguistic community and/or to associate with them in some way. The language student with the integrative motive will adopt features of the behavior that identifies the language group.

The other orientation proposed by Gardner and Lambert (1977) is the instrumental. It reflects a more utilitarian value of linguistic achievement. Instrumental orientations may reflect a desire for advancing to a better socio-economic position due to political circumstances or specialized professional training and job improvement with little regard or interest in the people whose language he/she has learned. The learner might also consider the language learning task as a way of demonstrating he/she is better educated or cultured and even develop the skill as a way of getting inside the cultural group for personal ends or to control a given situation. According to Gardner and Lambert (1972), whatever the utilitarian motives, he/she will acquire more language proficiency if his/her orientation is integrative instead of merely instrumental.

Unfortunately the problem of the benefit of an integrative orientation to an instrumental is not completely solved. John W. Oller (1977) describes an unpublished study by Oller, Hudson, and Liu (1976) who found that the desire to stay in the United States permanently on the part of Chinese graduate students in New Mexico was negatively correlated with language proficiency in English as a Second Language (ESL). This study exemplifies that a positive attitude does not unconditionally mean language proficiency.

A similar psychological theory was argumented by Mowrer (1950) regarding first language acquisition. Mowrer's theory (1950) suggests that the child's first language acquisition is motivated by his/her desire to be like the valued members of the family and, later, the desire to identify with the community he/she lives in.

Mowrer (1950) implies that the parent's activities and mere presence are reinforcing or rewarding because in the infant's mind these

activities are associated with basic biological and social needs and their satisfaction. Since this satisfaction is generally accompanied by talking and parent's verbalization, these sounds gain derived (or indirect) reinforcement attributes. If the infant is alone and utters a sound sequence like something heard from his/her parents, he/she will be comforted (or reinforced) by the utterance itself as if coming from his/her valued ones. If heard by the parents, he/she will probably receive direct and very positive reinforcement at once. This imitation is called identification by Mowrer (1950).

Mowrer's theory (1950) on identification through reinforcement is what a child's motive or orientation would most likely reflect. The child's identification will not carry the feelings of regret, or the desire to be like others, because of dissatisfaction with his/her own cultural group. His/her feelings will reflect his/her own emotional development and knowledge of the world. The child will most likely be merely playful about the learning task and imitative in order to participate in a particular activity with a valued or loved one. Young children will probably not acquire any language with an instrumental orientation. According to this researcher, their orientation, if placed into one sociopsychological category, will probably be an integrative one: the desire to "join in" whatever activities are taking place around him/her through communication, especially if the people or events around are important and meaningful to the child.

Interacting with people, communicating, thinking and playing are some of the main reasons children have for using language. They use language like a toy and, if the second language experience takes place at an early age, the same could be said. Children will love to use a second language when imitating and role playing in their games. They will pretend they are anyone or anything. Their ability to mimic is easily seen through their imitation of adult mannerisms and telephone conversations. They love to name things and use words. They love to learn new words whether in the vernacular or another language. They love dramatic role playing and cannot stand correction (Donoghue and Kunkle, 1979).

Yet, parents seldom correct a child's grammar unless it gets in the way of comprehension. They are proud of the efforts their children make to express themselves. They accept their bits and pieces and try to understand their telegraphese. Perhaps second language teachers should worry more about what the child is trying to say in the language they are learning and less about how they are saying it (Macnamara,

1977).

In second language acquisition children will learn whatever language they are exposed to but will learn faster and better if emotional warmth and psychological ties motivate him or her. The most important factor in second language acquisition and development seems to be the presence of a person with a sincere interest in the learner and in what the learner has to say. How he/she says it can be improved by different means, the important thing is successful communication.

This necessity is the same for a small four year old learning a second language as it is for an adult. This essential need is common to both the first and second acquisition processes and makes both processes qualitatively similar.